Providence
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 12:22-31
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It was the winter of 1621 when William Bradford wrote in his diary, "Behold, now another providence of God. A ship comes into the harbor". The theological implications of that assertion; namely, that God had something to do with that ship being at that place at that time are, to say the least, rather far-reaching. Bradford was speaking for a small band of very staunch people, perched on the bleak Massashusetts coast; people who were consistent believers that God had a hand in everything that happened to them. They believed, that is to say, in Providence - a tantalizing, lingering idea that is an anachronism for many people today - but an idea that is little understaood by most of us.

But first, may we think about those people who believed the doctrine and whose experience we will remember and celebrate this Thursday? We know the generalities of their story, but I was delighted this week to get acquainted again with the details. They were truly a remarkable group of people and I should like to tell a little of their story as a preface to the idea of Providence.

101 of them crowded onto the small ship Mayflower in September of 1620: they had planned to sail in two ships but one developed difficulty at the last minute. It took 66 days to cross the Atlantic, a good passage in that only one of their number died in route.

35 of the 101 were religious dissenters. The other 66 were recruited by backers of the project in order to assure a self-sufficient colony. It was, obviously, too late in the year to do any planting when they landed. Work parties went ashore daily and began constructing a "common house" while others looked for food. They had chosen the site for their plantation on what had been a large Indian cornfield, and one of the first discoveries was a cache of Indian corn. Their first encounter with the Indians was hostile and involved an exchange of arrows and shots, but the Indians did not return again until the following spring. We know now that the entire Indian population along the Eastern Seaboard had been badly decimated by disease, and fully three quarters of them had died before the Pilgrims landed.

It was a terrible winter. Bradford recorded that on some days two or three persons died, and that on occasion only half a dozen men were well enough to work. Starvation was held at bay by the supplies they had brought on the Mayflower, but hunger was a constant companion. Through it all a tiny village continued to rise.

And then one day in the Spring, March 16, 1621, an Indian appeared in the community who spoke English. His name was Samoset; he told the Pilgrims about another English-speaking Indian, Squanto, by name. Squanto had been kidnapped by an English trapper in 1614; sold as a slave in Spain, had escaped and lived in England with an official of the Newfoundland Company. On one of several round-trips across the Atlantic he jumped ship in 1618, only to discover that his entire tribe was gone - victims of an epidemic the year before.

Samoset and Squanto arranged a meeting between the leaders of the colony and Massasoit, Chief of the Wampanoags. That meeting resulted in a friendship treaty and the very helpful and famous advice about the advantage of placing a fish in each corn mound.

By late spring, 50 people were alive, eleven houses were built, and the planting was done - 20 acres of corn, six acres of peas and six of barley. The barley grew very poorly, the peas were a disaster and the colony now faced the very immediate possibility of starvation. But the corn did beautifully and produced two pounds of meal per person daily for the next winter.

So it was in the fall of 1621 that the 50 knew that they could survive and they planned an event to celebrate their remarkable achievement. Edward Winslow, one of the Pilgrims, wrote about the event to a friend, in what is the only eye-witness account of the first Thanksgiving.

> "Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. The four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king, Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor....And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

The English among them remembered the medieval custom of the "Harvest Home Festival" - a lusty and grand good time. But they added another dimension; a dimension with its roots in the history of the People of God. I would guess that these words from the Book of Deuteronomy had special significance to the Pilgrims.

"....the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm...and He brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

So we call it "Thanksgiving". They thanked God for bringing them through even though fifty of them had died: they thanked God for shelter which they had constructed out of logs they had cut and hewn - with their backs to a cold and forbidding wilderness: and they thanked God for the food which they had planted and tended and which had grown with a very pragmatic bit of advice from the Indians.

They believed, that is to say, in the Providence of God in some rather difficult circumstances. They became perhaps the most dramatic practitioners in all history of that curious advice Jesus one time passed on to His disciples: "do not be anxious about your life - what you shall eat - what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing".

Please notice that they did not try to substitute trust in God for hard work. They believed in Providence, but they also built their cabins in the wilderness and plowed the rocky soil. Their faith was not that God would hand them the necessities of life, but that God would be with them - in bad times: on gray days when little children died: and on good days when the corn was harvested. They knew, existentially, in a way we know only by reading, that their survival depended on every resource they could muster: and still they were grateful to God. They believed in Providence in a way we have difficulty comprehending.

One of the reasons is that we confuse Providence with some very bad but very popular theology. General George Patton for instance, who summoned the Chaplain the night before the attack on the Bastogne and ordered him to write a "good weather prayer" because he needed an air strike. Or Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop, who wrote a supplication for the Anglican Prayer Book that goes like this:

"O Almighty God, who for the sin of man dids't once drown all the world.... we humbly beseech Thee that although we for all our iniquities have worthily deserved a plague of rain, yet upon our true repentance Thou will send us such weather that we will receive the fruits of the earth in due season...."

On two levels the idea of Providence must overcome the hurdle of some very bad but popular theology. The first is what is called "special providence", the notion that God somehow intercedes in history to protect or otherwise do good things for certain people, while ignoring all the rest. That notion is a very personal and intense one for many people. It will, I would suggest, be invoked today, by one of the survivors of last week's 747 crash in Nairobi. One of them, inevitably, will conclude that he was snatched from the jaws of death by God himself. One can understand the tremendous sense of relief, the inexpressible gratitude, the new appreciation of life; - I am not being critical - under similar circumstances it would be difficult not to arrive at that conclusion, but nevertheless one is left with some very serious questions about those persons who were not spared and who are not now alive. Dr. E. Griffin Jones has written very bluntly about the theological dilemma: "The piety that sees a sign of divine favor in escape from sudden danger which destroys other lives, is a ....travesty of the faith that knows that 'God spared not His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us all'." (Providence, Divine and Human p.107: cited by Leslie Weatherhead in The Christian Agnostic p.207)

The second level, and the reverse of "special providence" is "punitive providence". It is verbalized when tragedy strikes and we ask "What have I done to deserve this?" Sometimes it is a good question: sometimes we cause our own tragedies. But the theological implication - that suffering is caused by God in order to chasten His wayward children is bankrupt, and contrary to everything we know about God, no matter how many people want to believe it.

Jesus never promised His followers that they would be safe from danger or immune from tragedy. In fact, he predicted with relentless consistency that His followers would suffer and be persecuted. What He did promise them is that He would be with them in the good days and the bad; that He would give them power to overcome the world - which does not mean a full stomach and fat wallet, but rather strength and heart and courage to live through anything that life deals out with peace and joy and gratitude.

Evil, we must acknowledge sooner or later, is a reality in the world. Evil is not God's will - but evil things do happen in God's world for two reasons. First human foolishness, arrogance, sin - if you will. God doesn't cause war - wars happen because men don't get along. A current and dramatic form of evil is hunger. It's symbol is the two year old child, with distended belly, apathetically waiting for death. God doesn't will or cause that. It happens because for several decades men have simply refused to act on the basis of the knowledge available: the sin of negligence one might call it. In an editorial last week the N.Y. Times observed that the recent Conference on Hunger in Rome neglected to address itself to the question of population control, out of deference to its host city. And then cited the statistical projection that if nothing is done more than a million children will die every month in the second quarter of the next century. That is not God's will - that is human sin.

Evil things also happen in the world by accident. Sometimes we don't want to understand that because we prefer a universe in which a celestial manager has everything under control at all times.

God has created a universe and placed His special gift of life in it. We believe that God loves what He has created and that He does have an ultimate plan, an intention for His creation. We also believe that He built freedom into His creation, and because of that freedom there is risk and danger and accidents and a lot of suffering. To have it otherwise, to believe in a God who arranges every event in our lives is to be deprived of that which makes us men - our freedom.

To believe otherwise - to believe in a God who knocks down an airplane here, saves a family there, gives this man 99 years and that man 29 is not Providence, it is simply wrong. And the most unfortunate part of all is that it prevents us from knowing what God really offers and what His Providence is.

The faith which the Pilgrim Fathers brought with them and expressed on a November day in 1621; the faith Jesus was talking about when He advised His disciples not worry about food and clothing, is a faith that regards God as a third party to every situation. He does not create the situation, but He is in it with us. It is a faith that sees the creative possibility in whatever is happening and knows that God's love is constant and that His will cannot be destroyed. "Providence", Paul Tillich once wrote, "means that there is a saving possibility....which cannot be destroyed by any event". (The Shaking of the Foundations p.111)

We learn that, after all, at the foot of the cross on which God's own Son was put to death. We discuss Providence, after all, not in an intellectual vacuum, but within our conviction that God somehow turned a hastily arranged and abundantly cruel execution into the supreme revelation of His love. If God could handle that: if the death of His own Son can come out meaning love - certainly He can deal lovingly and creatively with your troubles and mine.

Jesus taught us to call God "Father". And if I know anything about that at all, having had a father who loved me, and being a father, it is that the essence of fatherhood, or parenthood, is loving and granting freedom: loving so much that it hurts personally when one's children stumble and fall: loving so much that one can feel personally their disappointment and their joy. If I know anything about fatherhood, I know that it means having a plan - a will - an intent which includes their health and well-being and happiness; but never enforcing that plan so that they fail to grow and learn and become. Fatherhood - parenthood means granting freedom and accepting the risks: freedom to cross the street alone, to ride a bicycle, to play football, drive an automobile, go away to school, get married - and then hurting deeply when the risks of freedom result in disaster. A father cannot prevent accidents in the life of his children: he can't even prevent them from creating their own disasters - if he loves them enough to allow them to be free. What a father does is keeps on loving and being there to comfort and to stand with them in good days and bad.

That is what God has promised. That is what Providence means. God the creator has given us a world capable of sustaining us - and for that we give thanks. But He provides something far more essential than food and clothing: namely, love and strength. That is what He provided the Pilgrims, and beneath their gratitude for corn and shelter and life it is for that they gave thanks. That is what Jesus meant when He promised His disciples that God would take care of their needs.

So let us return our thanks in our time. Let us sing our gratitude - for a world that has provided, for love that has given meaning to our lives, but most of all - for a God who is with us and who will be with us-forever.

Now thank we all our God
With heart and hand and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His world rejoices.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And Blessed peace to cheer us. AMEN